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ABSTRACT

This paper traces the development of curriculum in higher education in the United States. A classical education based on the seven liberal arts was the basis of the curriculum for the early colonial colleges. In its earliest days, the curriculum was relevant to the preparation of students for the professions of the period. Over time, the curriculum evolved and was adapted to correspond to trends in U.S. society, but the colleges did not change the curriculum without intense debate and grave reservations. The tension between a prescribed course of study and the elective principle has cycled through the history of U.S. higher education. The elective system was both a creative and destructive educational development in the post-Civil War era. Eventually, the curriculum changed to a parallel course of study: the traditional classical education and the more modern, practical program. By the end of the 19th century, the U.S. curriculum had evolved into a flexible and diverse wealth of courses well beyond the scope of the colonial curriculum. This evolution moved the university into the mainstream of U.S. life. The debate over prescribed curriculum versus electives continues to generate lively discussion today. (Contains 12 references.) (SLD)

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THE ELECTIVE SYSTEM OR PRESCRIBED CURRICULUM: THE CONTROVERSY IN AMERICAN HIGHER EDUCATION

Emergence of Higher Education in America

Thomas J. Denham

Siena College

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Page

INTRODUCTION 2

CURRICULUM IN THE COLONIAL PERIOD: 1636-1789 2

EMPIRICISM AND ENLIGHTENMENT 3

THE NATION EMERGES AND THE CURRICULUM CHANGES: 1789-1865 3

THE IMPACT OF THE YALE REPORT 4

RECONSTRUCTION AND INDUSTRIALIZATION: 1865-1900 5

- Eliot and the Allies of the Elective System 5
- McCosh and the Advocates of the Ancient Curriculum 6
- The Elective Debate Beyond the Ivy League 8
- Impact of the Elective Principle 8

ELECTIVES IN THE 20th CENTURY 9

- The General Education Movement 10
- The Great Books Initiative 10
- The Second General Education Movement 11
- The Open Curriculum of the late 1960s and 1970s 11
- Multiculturalism 12

CURRENT STATE OF THE CONTROVERSY 12

THE FUTURE 13

SUMMARY 14

REFERENCES 15

INTRODUCTION

A classical education based on the seven liberal arts (grammar, rhetoric, logic, astronomy, arithmetic, geometry, and music), formed the basis of the curriculum for the early colonial colleges. From its earliest days, the curriculum was relevant in the preparation of students for professions of the period. Over time, the curriculum eventually evolved and adapted to the larger corresponding trends in American society. However, the colleges did not change the curriculum without intense debate or grave reservations.

CURRICULUM IN THE COLONIAL PERIOD: 1636-1789

Gwynne-Thomas (1981) reports that at Harvard, the prescribed curriculum consisted of Bible studies and Bible languages (Latin, Greek, and Hebrew), together with logic, ethics, philosophy, astronomy, and geometry (pp. 147-149). Princeton's curriculum was based on the models of Harvard and Yale (Cowley and Williams, 1991, p. 83). In addition to a classical education, the colonial college was consumed with instilling in its students the notion of proper conduct, character development, and civic virtue (Rudolph, 1962, pp. 30-31). Imported from Europe, the curricula of the colonial colleges were creatures of both the Reformation and the Renaissance. They valued both the sectarian and the humanistic ideals of classical scholarship with the goal of creating learned clergymen, as well as gentlemen and scholars. What few books there were encompassed Latin, the language of the Reformation, and Greek and ancient Greece, the rediscovery of the Renaissance. Latin was the language of the law, church, medicine and Aristotle. Greek was the language of the new humanism of Renaissance learning that brought Homer and Hesiod, Greek lyrics and idylls into the experience of an educated man (Rudolph, pp. 23-25).

In the colonial curriculum, Latin and Greek served as living languages and tools for the teacher and student to explore Aristotle's three philosophies (natural, moral, and mental) and the liberal arts of the medieval curriculum. These subjects formed the basic course of study at the colonial colleges. Latin, Greek, Hebrew, logic, and rhetoric were studied in the first year. The following year, Greek and Hebrew were continued with an introduction to natural philosophy, that later evolved into physics. In the junior sophister year, mental and moral philosophy were taught, which evolved into today's economics, ethics, political science, and sociology. The senior sophister year was a review in Latin, Greek, logic, and natural philosophy; mathematics was also begun (Rudolph, 1962, pp. 23-26). This program of study of classical learning was

assumed to be the recipe for success in the various learned professions of law, medicine, or theology. It was a body of knowledge that was to be absorbed and memorized, not criticized or questioned (Lucas, 1994, p. 109).

EMPIRICISM AND ENLIGHTENMENT

Harvard was a flagship in terms of a curriculum that responded to changes in society. Its course of study, originally designed to produce clergymen and statesmen, was diluted by a trend toward empiricism, a scientific point of view that questioned old truths and established new ones. By 1659 in the field of astronomy, the Ptolemaic system was out and the Copernican system was in. In the late seventeenth century, under the direction of Charles Morton, natural philosophy turned Newtonian-oriented (Rudolph, 1962, pp. 23-26). On the eve of the American Revolution, Newtonian empiricism and inductive reasoning were challenging the teachings of the church and deductive reasoning respectively; more attention was being paid to mathematics and natural science in America (Rudolph, pp. 29-30).

The legacy of the American Revolution to the American College was a widely held belief that the colleges were now serving a new responsibility to the new nation: the preparation of young men for citizenship in a republic that must prove itself. The Enlightenment and the Revolution shifted the curriculum from medieval model to an emphasis on natural law and the realm of science (Rudolph, 1962, pp. 40-41). Benjamin Rush, a Philadelphia physician and education advocate, warned that the ancient languages could stand in the way of the development of the country. He said, "To spend four or five years in learning two dead languages, is to turn our backs on a gold mine, in order to amuse ourselves catching butterflies" (Rudolph, p. 43).

THE NATION EMERGES AND THE CURRICULUM CHANGES: 1789 - 1865

During this era, the trend was toward a more fragmented, varied, vocational and specialized curriculum, and the conflict between advocates of classical studies and advocates of practical studies continued. As college enrollments grew and universities rapidly expanded westward, the intellectual community learned to allow religion and different thought patterns to coexist. The rise of the scientific method of inquiry made its inroads in the newly formed technical colleges with the introduction of new studies in engineering, agriculture, mechanics, and manufacturing. For example, West Point's curriculum was centered on mathematics, chemistry, and engineering (Cohen, 1998, pp. 74-75). As a result, the groundwork for specialized programs and the elective system was being laid (Cremin, 1977, p. 54).

THE IMPACT OF THE YALE REPORT

Greek and Latin were still being taught in most institutions during the first half of the nineteenth century, but the teaching of modern foreign languages expanded (Cohen, 1998, p. 75). Under the leadership of President Jeremiah Day, the Yale Report of 1828 was developed. This landmark report took the position that students should be required to study a variety of traditional topics so that all the areas of the mind (reasoning, accuracy in expression, etc.) would be exercised. The report became the most widely read and influential statement of educational philosophy of the era, in favor of the status quo of the ancient curriculum. Essentially, it was a defense for traditional classical education, making way for new courses of instruction and discounting religion as the centerpiece of the curriculum (Lucas, 1994, p. 132). The Yale Report helped justify other institution's decisions about curriculum development and confirmed the prescribed classics (Cohen, p. 76). It helped to retard any attempts at changing the curriculum in favor of electives. Reaffirming its stance on the prescribed curriculum, the authors of The Yale Report of 1828 stated, "our prescribed course contains those subjects only which ought to be understood, as we think, by every one who aims at a thorough education (Yale Report of 1828, 1997, p. 195).

By mid-nineteenth century, classics, mathematics, science, history, and philosophy were all represented, but few campus leaders dared to imply that any of the traditional subjects be eliminated (Cohen, 1998, p. 77). At the 1829 inauguration of Josiah Quincy of Harvard, he suggested a parallel course of study: one in the classics and another suited for a more modern institution. For fifty years this parallel curriculum solved the problems of incorporating new knowledge in the sciences and attracting more students by adding new courses, while maintaining a classical program to uphold traditional standards. The classical curriculum continued to survive because it had a purpose: to train for the professions of law, medicine, and ministry. During this era, the curriculum was in flux. There was a collection of traditional forms focusing on the classics alongside new areas of study, such as science and vocational subjects (Cohen, pp. 81-83). By the eve of the Civil War, there were 250 colleges in America, and there was a growing demand for utilitarian learning (Lucas, 1994, p. 117). As more and more students took advantage of higher education, the curriculum expanded and continued its trend toward vocational education. Colleges were tacitly preparing students for specific careers, providing an environment for research, and gaining prestige (Cohen, pp. 134-139).

RECONSTRUCTION AND INDUSTRIALIZATION: 1865-1900

During this era, the elective system began to thrive. By the end of the century, over half the courses offered in America were electives. Such prominent educational leaders as Charles Eliot of Harvard and James McCosh of Princeton spotlighted national attention to the debate over the prescribed curriculum and the elective principle. This period witnessed the proliferation of diverse degrees, with bachelor's degrees specializing in numerous areas of study (Cohen, 1998, pp. 134-139).

Eliot and the Allies of the Elective System

Charles W. Eliot, president of Harvard University for forty years 1869-1909, achieved national reputation status as an academic spokesman for collegiate reform. Under his leadership Harvard grew as a national rather than a provincial institution, and graduate programs in the arts and sciences were strengthened even beyond the quality of John's Hopkins University. He increased the number of faculty members from sixty to six-hundred. Eliot's notoriety took shape from his drive to replace the old prescribed curriculum with a broadly elective course of study (Rudolph, 1962, pp. 290-291). At his 1869 inauguration speech, Eliot demonstrated his commitment to the elective principle, saying, "This university recognizes no real antagonism between literature and science, and consents to no such narrow alternatives as mathematics or classics, science or metaphysics. We would have them all, and at their best" (Eliot, 1869, pp. 41-42). He reassured his audience that while an elective system would add to the curriculum, it would take away nothing (Rudolph, pp. 290-293). On the other hand, he was clear about the direction the university was going to take under his leadership, "The College therefore proposes to preserve in its efforts to establish, improve, and extend the elective system" (Eliot, pp. 41-42).

Eliot valued individual differences and varied courses of study, and based his rationale for the elective system to a combination of desire, necessity, principle, and preference. He said, "The elective system fosters scholarship, because it gives free play to natural preferences and inborn aptitudes, makes possible enthusiasm for a chosen work, relieves the professor and the ardent…[student] of the presence of a body of students who are compelled to an unwelcome task, and enlarges instruction by substituting many and various lessons given to small lively classes, for a few lessons many times repeated to different sections of a numerous class" (Rudolph, 1962, pp. 290-293). Eliot's views of the elective system were grounded in the ideals of the university, liberal education, and freedom of learning. A real university would encompass

both liberal and technical subjects. In addition, a sincere university would incorporate both undergraduate instruction and a variety of schools for graduate and professional training (Butts and Cremin, 1953, p. 394).

Eliot was expressing for higher education the same democratic philosophies that Jefferson, Jackson, and Lincoln had expressed for the nation. Eliot realized that Harvard could not grow in national stature until it developed departments of in-depth study. This American spirit that valued the individual helped bring science and the other disciplines on a level plane with traditional subjects. Eliot methodically and persistently integrated the elective principle into every aspect of Harvard life, such as dropping Greek as an entrance requirement. In 1872 all subject requirements for seniors were abolished. Seven years later it was extended to juniors, and in 1884 extended to sophomores. In 1885 subject requirements were significantly reduced for freshmen, and fourteen years later, freshmen were only required to take rhetoric and a modern language (Rudolph, 1962, pp. 294).

President Andrew D. White at Cornell carried out the elective system with less opposition than Eliot. Cornell grew in size and diversity and boasted numerous colleges within the university, including an agricultural school, a medical school, and a school of industrial and labor relations (Rudolph, 1962, p. 266). By 1869, Cornell was allowing an almost unrestricted system of electives (Lucas, 1994, p. 167). An 1895 survey indicated that Harvard and Cornell were the most elective institutions; Rutgers, with twenty-four required courses for the bachelors, was the least elective. Cornell prided itself on converting knowledge from abstract subject matter into education that students could use in practice (Cohen, 1998, p. 134). In addition, Professor W. P. Atkinson of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) was an active proponent of a more practical curriculum and urged equality of the physical sciences with the traditional classical studies.

McCosh and the Advocates of the Ancient Curriculum

Advocates of the prescribed curriculum looked to Princeton and Yale for leadership (Rudolph, 1962, p. 302). James McCosh became president of Princeton in 1868 and was an outspoken critic of Eliot's reform movement (Rudolph, pp. 297-299). McCosh embraced the faculty psychology, a theory of the mind based on the authority of the consciousness or an awareness of the inner workings of the spiritual faculties of man. He believed that the chief aim of a college education was to improve the faculties which God had given man, and that

traditional classical education was the best expression of the eternal spirit of man (Butts and Cremin, 1953, p. 332). In addition, he gave first place to the classics, mathematics, and philosophy as the essential content of a liberal education (Butts and Cremin, pp. 177-178).

In 1885 McCosh and Eliot publicly debated the merits of their positions and thereby continued to bring national attention to the curriculum controversy. McCosh defended the prescribed curriculum, compulsory class attendance, compulsory religious instruction, strict discipline, and limited specialization. He stressed an undying belief in the unity of knowledge and that the college could supply the essence of that unity in a select body of courses (Rudolph, 1962, pp. 297-299). Unlike Eliot, McCosh was wary of unbridled freedom and believed that if given the opportunity, students would take the easy way out. He argued that unrestricted freedom created an negative environment in which faculty and students could do as they pleased, resulting in the disappearance of a uniform college experience (Cohen, 1998, p. 142).

Eliot focused on a strong commitment to science, as well as freedom, and that made the elective principle the academic application of nineteenth-century liberalism. He stressed that electives were an instrument of liberal education and social development that also continued to bring science and other disciplines into equality with the traditional subjects. The trends of the era supported Eliot's position, but both sides were argued effectively (Rudolph, 1962, p. 300). Like McCosh, Noah Porter, president of Yale from 1871 to 1886, also defended the values and instruction of the traditional college. He outlined his views in his 1870 book, *The American Colleges and the American Public*. Taking a conservative position for a single prescribed course of study for all, he was convinced that the American college had adequately met the needs of the public, and therefore the public did not desire any radical changes, such as the introduction of newer practical studies or the use of the elective system into the curriculum (Butts and Cremin, 1953, p. 393). He and other advocates, such as West, were concerned that the uniform college experience was beginning to disappear with the advent of the elective principle, since a bachelor's degree was now merely an accumulation of 120 disparate college credits, not necessarily even from the same institution.

Andrew F. West, graduate dean of Princeton and a prominent educational leader, was diametrically opposed to Eliot's camp. He was skeptical that the elective system was achieving all that Eliot claimed it would and he asserted his belief in the prescribed curriculum (Butts and Cremin, 1953, p. 393). His main argument against the elective system was that there was no

patterned learning experience and two people could go through the college at the same time without ever having taken a course in common. In addition, the elective system gave faculty the license to prepare courses in narrow areas of interest at the expense of classical education. Allies of the prescribed curriculum stated that the elective curriculum fostered intellectual anarchy and disarray. It was not until the 1920s and 1930s that the General Education movement reacted to the fragmented curriculum (Cohen, 1998, pp. 142-145).

The Elective Debate Beyond the Ivy League

The Morrill Acts and the Land Grant College Acts continued the westward growth of American higher education. The elective system fit the philosophy of large state schools in the Midwest and West due to their commitment to public service and learning, which typically emphasized the practical over the ornamental (Lucas, 1994, p. 151). By the end of the nineteenth century, the size of the institution remained a major determinant of the type of curriculum and instructional format (Cohen, 1998, pp. 149-150). Large, wealthy, private universities were national in orientation and recognized the value of electives as a quality of a dynamic institution. Small women's colleges were predominately traditional, with enough electives to accommodate subjects that were female in focus. The least elective were the state universities of the south, riddled with poverty, and the small colleges of New England and elsewhere that were in the grasp of the past. Harvard continued its leadership in the movement to unshackle higher education from the past and steer it forward with a contagious respect for learning (Rudolph, 1962, p. 303). Many of the oldest colleges held to the prescribed curriculum because they believed in it ideologically. For other colleges, the decision to move to an elective system was based more in finances than ideology (Rudolph, p. 300). Colleges that were starved for students utilized the elective principle as a strategy to increase enrollments and generalize the collegiate experience. For example, in 1892, with enrollment down to less than 30, President Henry E. Shepherd of the College of Charleston boasted to his trustees that the institution was one of the few in the country that had retained the ancient curriculum. Five years later, the College of Charleston adopted the elective system, and shortly thereafter built a new dormitory to manage the increase in enrollment (Rudolph, p. 294).

Impact of the Elective Principle

A major impact of the elective system was the creation of new curricular developments in the twentieth century. For example, the elective principle was the inspiration for such

innovations as concentrations, distributions, majors, minors, tutorials, preceptorials, honors, independent study, reading periods, seminars, field studies, general education, and comprehensive exams. In 1908, President Eliot noted that the elective principle made scholarship possible for faculty as well as undergraduate and graduate students. Eliot reinforced the notion that the old course of study held the student and teacher to the most superficial kind of knowledge (Rudolph, 1962, p. 303). However, electives granted both student and professor the opportunity to explore their interests in greater depth and encouraged the accumulation of new knowledge. It helped demystify the idea that the ancient curriculum was all there was to know. Electives promoted the growth of science and shattered the concept that any one person could know everything worth knowing. Elective proponents asserted the following: all educated individuals need not know the same things, that no area of knowledge was of greater worth, and any area of study was as useful as any other. Perhaps it can be said that the elective system moved professors and students from an adversarial relationship to a more collaborative learning model (Rudolph, p. 305).

The elective system made such rapid progress in institutions of higher education that by the turn of the century more than half of the course enrollments across the nation were in optional classes (Cohen, 1998, p. 135). As the curriculum expanded, little was dropped. The idea that students should be allowed to pursue any course of study that fit their interests and aspirations was widely accepted. The spirit of democracy justified faculty to teach what they wanted, and allowed students to take what they wanted. Electives became a hallmark of freedom (Cohen, p. 134). The elective system also sent the message that colleges had no authority to prescribe a curriculum (Cohen, pp. 142-143). In the end, Yale and Princeton struck a balance between the old and new systems, thereby achieving some level of moderation. In 1876 and 1883, against the will of President Noah Porter, the Yale faculty voted to free most of the junior and senior years from prescription. By 1893, electives were granted to sophomores and in 1901 there were no prescriptions for juniors and seniors. Yale sought to take a middle of the road approach that accommodated old values with new opportunities (Rudolph, 1962, p. 303). -

ELECTIVES IN THE 20th CENTURY

In the complex society of industrial and post-industrial America, the objectives of college students were diverse. These varied goals, plus the growing knowledge of different abilities and interests of students, presented a strong argument for the elective system (Butts and Cremin,

1953, p. 446). There was curricular experimentation during the early part of the new century. For example, Harvard developed the plan of program concentration while other institutions designed the major-minor system. Despite the extremes of Harvard's elective system and Yale's prescribed curriculum, by the turn of the 20th century, the most common pattern was to create a balance of both. A popular plan was to have a prescribed program early on, followed by electives in the junior or senior years (Butts and Cremin, pp. 446-447).

The General Education Movement

By the time of World War I, many educators were troubled by the advancement of the elective system. Butts and Cremin (1953) state that the General Education movement was born out of reaction to the fragmented curriculum and the growing realization that the elective system did not guarantee a common education for undergraduates (pp. 446-447). The theory behind General Education was that it should contain a broad background of knowledge that all educated citizens should have no matter what their occupational goals (p. 605). Critics, such as John Dewey, advocated that the elective system resulted in the loss of coherence and intellectual integration in the curriculum. He and other advocates urged that some common learning was indispensable and the goal was to create cohesive modern learning. As a result general "survey" or orientation courses came into vogue, but they were criticized for being too shallow and superficial. The period between 1920 and 1940 was a time when institutions attempted to avoid the intellectual anarchy of excessive specialization. Incrementally, it became more common to have the first two years of college immersed in general education (Lucas, 1994, p. 214).

The Great Books Initiative

Launched in 1930 under the leadership of the Chancellor of the University of Chicago, Robert Maynard Hutchins, the "Great Books" or Chicago Plan experiment was aimed at reviving the "classical" liberal arts tradition. The undergraduate unit had a prescribed course of study founded around the reading and discussion of the so-called "Great Books" of Western civilization. A "Great Book" is one that stands the test of time, but remains contemporary and speaks to universal themes. General education at Chicago was defined as the study of the greatest art and works of Western civilization, as well as reading, writing, thinking, speaking, and mathematics. The goal was that such a curriculum would address all the elements common to humanity (Lucas, 1994, p. 215). This program of study took the form of interdisciplinary survey courses taught through lectures, supplemented with frequent small group discussion. The

university should, in Hutchins's view, focus on promoting the broad understanding that constitutes the basis for specific skills and places their application in some intelligible context (Lucas, p. 217).

The Second General Education Movement

After World War II, there was a rebirth of the general education movement. The best example of this was the 1945 faculty report from Harvard entitled *General Education in a Free Society,* more commonly known as the "Redbook." It soon became an excellent exploration of the meaning of general education in the modern era. According to the Harvard Redbook education had two purposes: first, to prepare students for their professional and personal objectives in life, and second, to teach them the common education of a culture that they share with others. The report concluded the need for a balance between general and specialized education (Lucas, 1994, p. 250). The launching of Sputnik in 1957 helped shift the preoccupation with the individual to the corporate and initiated a trend toward education that contributed to national requirements and policies. The Kennedy years of the early 1960s reinforced a drive to regain a position of world leadership for the nation. The earlier preoccupation with general education now seemed less urgent in an age of crisis with communism (Lucas, p. 253).

The Open Curriculum of the late1960s and 1970s

The social turmoil of the 1960s and 1970s weakened the argument for general education when reaction against social efficiency and the use of education as an instrument of national policy set in. Social justice was now the sole criteria by which the curriculum should be judged. This era was characterized by a degree of democratization aimed at opening learning to a wider array of abilities and talents (Lucas, 1994, p. 253). Few institutions of higher education were able to maintain requirements beyond broad distribution areas and the curriculum became increasingly vocational. Since education was perceived as a commodity, students acted like consumers selecting anything they wanted to study, and whatever faculty wanted to teach gained a place in the curriculum. The proliferation of diverse courses ruled the period with faculty as specialists defending their favorite courses. In general, students were dividing their time between major field requirements, electives, and distribution requirements (Lucas, pp. 225-229).

Multiculturalism

A major theme that dominated the 1970s until the close of the century was the movement of curricular inclusion of minority interests and concerns. Courses of study more responsive to interests based on age, gender and ethnicity were introduced, such as special programs in black studies, Hispanic studies, gay studies, and women's studies. Reminiscent of the era of McCosh and Eliot, there was an oscillation back and forth between a curriculum of common and coherent learning and diversification in the 1980s and 1990s (Lucas, 1994, p. 247). The Political Correctness controversy of the late 1980s and early 1990s stemmed from a conviction that all of Western civilization was oppressive and reactionary. Critics charged that the cultural canon and traditional general education was Eurocentric and elitist, sexist, racist and homophobic. As a result, the study of the classics of Western civilization needed to be replaced with courses devoted to Third-World cultures and victims of oppression. Multiculturalism as a curriculum reform movement advocated the retrieval of minority works from the margins to which it had been historically consigned (Lucas, 1994, p. 272-273). On the other hand, critics like D'Souza (1991) denounced the orthodoxy of the multiculturalism reform movement. "Instead of liberal education, what American students are getting is its diametrical opposite, an education in closed-mindedness, which is to say, illiberal education. (p 229). Lucas (1994) argues that the major issue in higher education toward the end of the 20th century was the search for a "center" for undergraduate learning (pp. 296-297). The problem was a creative balance between the demands for diversity and the equally urgent need to find a unifying center or common core. By the end of the era there was little consensus on how to achieve this objective.

CURRENT STATE OF THE CONTROVERSY

Siena College is an example of how some institutions of higher learning are striking a balance between general education and electives. The *Siena College Catalog* (2002) indicates that all first year students are required to take the Foundations Sequence. In this prescribed course of study, students are placed in small classes that meet with a single professor for the entire year. There is a common set of readings for all students, both classical and contemporary, that helps foster intellectual dialog outside the classroom. The course is writing intensive and explores such themes as nature, society, secular worldviews, religious worldviews, and the American experience. Siena students must earn the 120 credits required for graduation through core, major/concentration and elective groupings. The Core Curriculum consists of 14 courses

with a common coherent educational experience. Core courses engage students in critical thinking and stress effective communication. The Core requirements are courses in the following themes: Foundations sequence, Disciplinary Requirements, Area Requirements, Aesthetic Dimensions, Social Science Perspectives, Natural World, Literature, Human Past, Philosophical Questions, and Religious Dimensions. In addition, students complete between 30 to 39 credit hours in their respective major. Current criticism of higher education is that the curriculum is not relevant to the social, economic and political issues of the day. Critics charge that the American collegiate curriculum in a post-9/11 world is not responsive to the changing trends of the era in terms of demographics, technology, and international education.

THE FUTURE

The future direction of this controversy is hard to predict. However, it is safe to say from history that the core of liberal learning will be revised and reinvented by institutions as a function of balancing the interests of changing social values and the need for a common educational experience. The current trends economically, financially, and politically are towards globalization. Advances in technology and the events of September 11th have helped speed our institutions in the direction toward internationalization, and as a result so has the curriculum. At St. Lawrence University, for example, more than half the students participate in term abroad programs. Put simply, graduates will be unprepared for the demands of the 21st century workplace without electives in international relations, finance, politics, and sociology. In addition, the drive for technological dominance in the world will encourage higher education institutions to provide their students with computer skills to prepare them for the high tech world of work. Lucas (1994) points out that a major influence in curriculum is the power of tradition that has kept the liberal arts intact at the core of undergraduate education (p. 450). Breneman (1994) goes one step further when he declares that the finest undergraduate education available in this country is found in private liberal arts colleges (p. 4). He states that students at these institutions have the opportunity to immerse themselves in the best that has been written or produced in literature, science, history, mathematics, and art (p. 10). He concludes that for our society and culture to have any ultimate meaning these pursuits must be kept alive and nurtured at the heart of higher learning (p. 10).

SUMMARY

The curriculum controversy has attracted attention in the past and will continue to be debated into the future since the nature between a prescribed course of study and the elective principle is cyclical. The elective system was both a creative and destructive educational development of the post-Civil War era. Eventually, with the changing political, economic, and social nature of the new nation, the curriculum adapted to a parallel course of study: the traditional classical education, and the more modern, practical program. The elective system was a function of *Lenfreiheit* – freedom to learn - for students, faculty, and the discipline. The movement toward electives was gradual but inevitable as the nation matured, expanded, and embraced the philosophies of self-reliance and self-expression. The elective principle was the catalyst for the development of departments of knowledge and areas of scholarship, and enabled colleges to grow into universities. It asserted that one subject was no more important than another, and ushered out the classics in America, that for centuries had been the hallmark of an educated person. By the end of the nineteenth century, the American curriculum evolved into a flexible and diverse wealth of courses beyond the imagination or approval of the colonial faculty. Most importantly, the elective principle gave vitality to the American college at a time when its remoteness from society threatened to destroy the foundation of higher education. It moved the American university into the mainstream of American life. Lucas (1994) concludes that the impact of these changes during the last half of the nineteenth century was the promise of social mobility to those willing to subject themselves to the rigors of the academy (p. 123). The spirited debate over a prescribed curriculum or electives continues to generate lively discussion today. There persists a desire to preserve certain subjects or bodies of knowledge that are timeless, while at the same time creating a curriculum that protects choice and is responsive to the needs of the larger society. As the curriculum continues to evolve naturally, those institutions and individuals that value education will debate the prescribed-elective controversy into the foreseeable future.

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